



## **Legislative Bulletin.....March 27, 2001**

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### **H.R. 801— Veterans’ Opportunities Act of 2001 (Smith, Christopher)**

**Order of Business:** The bill is scheduled to be considered under a motion to suspend the rules on Tuesday, March 27.

**Summary:** H.R. 801 would affect a wide variety of veterans’ programs that can be divided up into three areas: 1) educational assistance, 2) transition and outreach, and 3) burials, insurance and other benefits.

The main educational assistance provisions are as follows:

- The maximum allowable annual ROTC award for benefits under the Montgomery GI Bill would be increased from \$2,000 to \$3,400.
- The Veterans Affairs’ work-study program for veteran-students would be expanded to include helping with outreach efforts, including in state veterans homes.
- Veterans could use their educational assistance benefits at institutions that train people for technological occupations and on their own for independent study (as long as it’s monitored by an “institution of higher learning”).
- The disabled spouse or surviving spouse of a severely disabled service-connected veteran could receive special restorative training.

The main transition and outreach provisions are as follows:

- The VA would be given the authority to maintain transition assistance offices overseas.
- Pre-separation counseling would be available to departing service-members as early as 18 months before retirement and 9 months before any other departure from the military.
- State approving agencies would be required to conduct outreach programs about available benefits to eligible veterans and dependents (children, spouses, and dependent parents). The availability of services to dependents would have to be publicized through the media, the Internet, and veterans publications.

- When a veteran or dependent first applies for any benefit, the VA would have to provide information about all benefits available to them.

The main provisions on burials, insurance, and other benefits are as follows:

- The burial and funeral expense for a service-connected veteran would increase from \$1,500 to \$2,000.
- The burial and funeral expense for a *non*-service-connected veteran would increase from \$300 to \$500.
- The burial plot allowance for all veterans would increase from \$150 to \$300.
- The Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance (SGLI) program would expand to include spouses and children. Spousal coverage would not exceed \$100,000; child coverage would be \$10,000. Upon termination of SGLI, the policy could be converted to a private life insurance policy.
- Retroactive to October 1, 2000, the maximum amount of SGLI coverage available to a service member would increase from \$200,000 to \$250,000.
- The automobile and adaptive equipment grant for severely disabled veterans would increase from \$8,000 to \$9,000.
- The grant for specially adapted housing would increase from \$43,000 to \$48,000, and the amount for additional housing adaptations that may be needed later in life would increase from \$8,250 to \$9,250.
- When determining whether a veteran or spouse is eligible for pensions for a permanent and total non-service-connected disability, the value of property used for farming, ranching, or similar agricultural purposes would not be included.

**Cost to Taxpayers:** The CBO estimates that the total cost of H.R. 801 would be over \$2.8 billion in FY2001 (if signed into law this year) and almost \$16 billion through FY2005. The changes in direct spending over current law would be zero in FY2001 and \$221 million through FY2005. The bulk of the changes would be due to increased burial benefits.

**Does the Bill Create New Federal Programs or Rules?:** YES. In addition to the expansion of existing programs, this bill would require new outreach programs.

**Constitutional Authority:** The Committee Report cites Congress' power to 'provide for the common Defense and general Welfare of the United States' in Article I, Section 8.

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## **H.R. 811— Veterans' Hospital Emergency Repair Act (Smith, Christopher)**

**Order of Business:** The bill is scheduled to be considered under a motion to suspend the rules on Tuesday, March 27.

**Summary:** H.R. 811 would authorize the Department of Veterans Affairs to improve, renovate, and update patient care facilities in what would be deemed “major medical facility projects.” The Secretary would be directed to select projects that achieve one or more of the following: protect against earthquakes and fires, update utility systems, improve access for the disabled, or modernize specialized programs (such as rehabilitation centers for the blind, traumatic brain injury programs, and spinal cord injury centers). \$250 million would be authorized for FY2002, and \$300 million would be authorized for FY2003.

The GAO would have to submit a report to Congress (by April 1, 2003) evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of general authorization for major projects (as in this bill) rather than specific authorization of each individual project. The Secretary of Veterans Affairs would have to submit to Congress a report detailing the specific projects chosen and evaluating the authorization process (as with the GAO report).

**Additional Background:** In the past, major medical facility projects like this were authorized specifically rather in the general fashion proposed by H.R. 811.

**Cost to Taxpayers:** \$250 million would be authorized for FY2002, and \$300 million would be authorized for FY2003. The CBO estimates that implementing the legislation would actually cost \$11 million in 2002 and \$506 million through 2006.

**Does the Bill Create New Federal Programs or Rules?:** YES . It authorizes capital expenditures for medical facilities and mandates two new reports, as described in the summary above.

**Constitutional Authority:** The Committee Report cites Congress' power to ‘provide for the common Defense and general Welfare of the United States’ in Article I, Section 8.

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